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RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 1640

RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 9843

RUEHLI/AMEMBASSY LISBON PRIORITY 1321

RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0441

RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 3041

RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 0959

RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3566

RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0562

RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0345

RUEHQD/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 1712

RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME PRIORITY 0561

RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE PRIORITY 0810

RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000337

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: CATHOLIC RECTOR SAYS OPPOSITION MUST PLAY CHAVEZ' ELECTORAL GAME

REF: A. 05 CARACAS 2549

[¶](#)B. CARACAS 00123

Classified By: Mark Wells, Acting Political Counselor,  
for Reason 1.4(b).

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Summary  
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[¶](#)1. (C) Catholic University Rector Luis Ugalde told A/Polcouns February 7 the opposition must see the presidential elections through despite the obstacles President Hugo Chavez is sure to throw up. Ugalde said Chavez' recent dialogues with the church and private sector are an obvious ruse designed to make Chavez appear more conciliatory to the electorate. With the United States, however, Chavez plans to polarize relations in an effort to paint all Chavez opponents as agents of imperialism, the Rector said. Ugalde optimistically predicted a single candidate would emerge by July -- probably Teodoro Petkoff. Petkoff's left-of-center message may dig significantly into the Chavez base, he said, which is increasingly frustrated with the failures of the revolution. Chavez will concede to a new National Electoral Council (CNE) board, but the electoral registry is the prime concern, he added, noting that several universities are gearing up to assist the NGO Sumate in an independent audit of corrupted voter rolls. Ugalde's insightful analysis suggests the opposition has a ray of hope this year despite serious and substantive obstacles. End summary.

[¶](#)2. (C) Poloff met on February 7 with Father Luis Ugalde, Rector of the conservative Andres Bello Catholic University (UCAB) in Caracas. Ugalde, an outspoken critic of Chavez and regular public opinion columnist, is the senior Jesuit in Venezuela and president of the association of Jesuit universities in Latin America (ref a).

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It's A Game, But They Have To Play It  
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¶13. (C) Ugalde said the opposition's principal weakness is uncertainty over whether to participate in elections. Some opposition groups, he said, are only half-heartedly calling for reforms at the National Electoral Council (CNE) with the hope of repeating the December 2005 opposition boycott. He commended retired Cardinal Rosalio Castillo Lara for speaking his mind in calling for persons to engage in civil disobedience (re article 350 of the constitution), but faulted the prelate for not having a clear end state in mind. Castillo and other groups, he said, are unwisely betting on some kind of military coup to save them from Chavez. This strategy will only serve Chavez, Ugalde warned, by convincing a significant portion of opposition voters to abstain from voting. He predicted that Chavez will continue to provoke and outrage possible abstentionists, as he did when CNE President Jorge Rodriguez, the supposed arbiter of the presidential race, attended the February 4 Chavez rally and applauded when Chavez crowed about getting 10 million votes. Ugalde asserted that widespread opposition abstention will only discredit the opposition in the eyes of the international community, which is a potential brake on Chavez' electoral excesses. It's all Chavez' game, Ugalde concluded, but it's a game the opposition has to play to the end.

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Dialogue With Church, Business, a Red Herring  
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¶14. (C) Ugalde said the President's recent dialogues with some social groups is an electoral show for Chavez to appear more open and reasonable to voters. Regarding Chavez' recent discussion with the Catholic Church, Ugalde said, both sides have no delusions about anything useful coming out of it. Ugalde said the Church's ostensibly conciliatory tone is tactical only, designed to gain credibility in the event of a major political crisis. He dismissed any public perception of divisions among Catholic bishops regarding Chavez' creeping authoritarianism, noting that the bishops issued a unanimous condemnation of the government during its January meeting (ref b). Ugalde said the Vatican, too, understood the dire political situation in Venezuela but moved to replace its Nuncio in Venezuela to maintain possible lines of communication with the Bolivarians. Ugalde noted that Chavez had embarked on a dialogue with the business confederation FEDECAMARAS for similar reasons.

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Make All Chavez Opponents U.S. Lackeys  
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¶15. (C) The one exception to Chavez' dialogue scheme, Ugalde said, is Venezuela's newly-charged aggression against the United States. Ugalde posited that Cuban President Fidel Castro had advised Chavez to whip up fears of a U.S. invasion to the point of considering Venezuela to be in a de facto state of war. This would make any opposition presidential candidate, or anyone who opposed Chavez, by definition a traitor to Venezuela and ally of the United States. Ugalde expected Chavez to continue pestering the United States with the hope of eliciting reactions that would justify his invasion alert. In reality, Ugalde said, most Venezuelans remain friendly toward the United States and would probably not be swayed by Chavez' bellicose rhetoric.

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Unified Candidate By Summer  
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¶16. (C) Ugalde believed a single opposition candidate will

ultimately emerge from the field of three: Julio Borges, Teodoro Petkoff, and Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales. Ugalde said he is close to Borges, a UCAB graduate, but admitted that the Primero Justicia (PJ) leader lacks passion and comes off like an "Oxford professor" with the people. Borges' candidacy is important, Ugalde said, to consolidate the splintered PJ party, but would not capture the excitement of the majority of Venezuelans. In contrast, he said, Petkoff had both the passion and message. Ugalde said he urged Petkoff to announce his candidacy as soon as possible. He said Petkoff needs to take his scathing and powerful criticism of Chavez out of the pages of his Caracas daily Tal Cual to the more effective medium of television. Petkoff worries, he added, of being branded a tool of the Venezuelan right by his traditional leftist allies (Petkoff was a minister under the center-right Caldera administration) and will try to maintain a progressive socialist tack during the campaign. Regarding Rosales, Ugalde presumed the Zulia Governor would run as Petkoff's unofficial running mate, which would allow him to keep his governorship if Chavez wins. Ugalde said he has been at meetings between Borges and Petkoff, and was confident that by July both candidates would assess their position and agree to support the strongest contender.

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**Chavez Is Vulnerable This Year**  
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**17. (C) Ugalde noted that Chavez' recent launch of new**

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economic initiatives, designed to pour money into the lowest sectors of society, will fail, and fail soon. Ugalde, whose university administers numerous Catholic-based social programs, said poor Venezuelans are becoming increasingly disenchanted with Chavez and his failure to improve living conditions in seven years. He specifically cited the Mission Barrio Adentro medical program for the poor as a failure, reaching far fewer people with quality medical treatment than the government lets on. (Note: UCAB's Santa Ines free hospital was so effective in the adjacent barrio of Antimano, university officials have told us, that several Barrio Adentro offices were shuttered for lack of business.) Ugalde quipped that support for Chavez is so shallow that half of the million-plus crowd that participated in the government's February 4 march (septel) would probably vote for Chavez' opponent in December.

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**Electoral Conditions: There's the Rub**  
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**18. (C) Ugalde said the Bolivarian Government will have to replace the five-person board of the CNE, if for no other reason than to put a good face on the elections to outsiders.**

Ugalde said the new board would be as subservient to Chavez as the current one, however, an unavoidable effect of Chavez' domination of the other branches of government. Ugalde said the bloated and non-transparent electoral registry was perhaps the greatest challenge facing the opposition, and he was certain the CNE would not open the suspect rolls to a proper audit. Revolutions hold elections, he remarked, but they do not lose them. Ugalde said the opposition would have to rely on the NGO Sumate to battle the CNE on this point. He said several universities (Universidad Central de Venezuela, Universidad Metropolitana, Universidad Los Andes, and his own UCAB) were preparing to assist Sumate in a USG-funded independent audit of the registry.

**19. (C) Ugalde was also hopeful that international observation would help even the playing field for the opposition, and expressed confidence that the European Union and OAS would, as with the parliamentary elections, send observation missions. He said the government had invited the EU and OAS last year in hopes of legitimizing its victory, but the**

opposition boycott laid bare many of the Bolivarians' electoral antics. However, the return of international observers, he noted, would require credible assurances from the opposition that they would indeed see the elections through to the end.

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Comment  
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**¶10.** (C) Ugalde is a sober and informed observer of the Venezuelan political scene, though he may be overly optimistic about the opposition candidates' willingness to back an early front-runner by the summer. Ugalde borders on being positive on the opposition's chances in the presidential elections, though he stressed several times that there are pitfalls. Opposition worries over vote secrecy may hand Chavez an easy win as happened last December. Government abuse of state resources in the elections and CNE cheating/manipulation are also virtual certainties that could suffocate the opposition's chances.

BROWNFIELD